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AUTHOR Custer, Jeanene D.; Osguthorpe, Russell T.
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ABSTRACT

Twelve educable and three trainable mentally retarded fifth and sixth grade students were trained in techniques to allow them to tutor nonhandicapped students in sign language. Observers noted free play interaction between handicapped and nonhandicapped children at lunch hours. Results indicated that the mean percentage of interaction between handicapped and nonhandicapped peers increased from 5% to 46% of the available time following the tutoring. Nonhandicapped students responded positively to their handicapped tutors and parent reactions to the project were also positive. (DB)

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Improving Social Acceptance by Training Handicapped Students to Tutor Their Nonhandicapped Peers

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Jeanene D. Custer

Ph.D. Candidate

Department of Educational Psychology

Russell T. Osguthorpe

Associate Professor

David O. McKay Institute of Education

Brigham Young University

Provo, Utah 84602

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Running head: Tutoring and Social Acceptance

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Improving Social Acceptance by Training Handicapped Students to Tutor Their Nonhandicapped Peers

Social rejection is one of the most critical problems faced by mainstreamed handicapped students. While increasing numbers of handicapped students are being educated in regular settings, research evidence does not suggest that there is any increase in the social acceptance of these students (Carlberg and Kavale, 1980). Peer tutoring has been shown to be an effective technique for improving students' personal/social adjustment, but little data has been collected with handicapped students as tutors (Osguthorpe, 1980; Wagner, 1973).

The present study was conducted to assess the effects on social acceptance of training mentally handicapped students to tutor their nonhandicapped peers.

Sign language was selected as the tutoring topic because it is an unknown topic to most nonhandicapped children, allowing the handicapped tutors to master a cognitive task which is unfamiliar to their tutees. Sign language is also a strong reinforcement for other language arts instruction for communication-impaired children.

Method

Tutors and Tuttes

The handicapped students for this study were 15 fifth and sixth grade mentally retarded students with chronological ages ranging from 9-13, and mental ages between 4 and 9. Twelve of the students were classified as educable and three as trainable.

Fifteen nonhandicapped students participated in the study as tutees. They were sixth grade students attending the same school as the handicapped students. The only criterion for nonhandicapped student participation was their lack of knowledge of sign language.

Sign Language Content

The tutoring content included the alphabet, numbers from 1-10, 19 simple sentences, and the song, "Hello Again" from Neil Diamond's "The Jazz Singer." The sentences were designed to enhance social interaction between the handicapped and nonhandicapped groups. For example, "What is your name?" "Where do you live?" "How are you?" "What is your teacher's name?"

Procedure

In order to measure the social contact between handicapped and nonhandicapped students, the lunch hour was changed to allow both groups of students to be together in a free-play environment (the regular school schedule did not provide for integrated lunch and recess). Using the Social Acceptance Observation Form, (developed specifically for this study) two observers recorded contact time between the handicapped and nonhandicapped students during their 45 minute lunch break. Observations were made for three consecutive days prior to the sign language tutoring and then for three consecutive days eight weeks later after the tutoring ended.

The handicapped students were taught the alphabet during the first two weeks. On the tenth day, the nonhandicapped students were invited into the self-contained classroom to learn sign language. Thereafter, the handicapped students were trained four days a week and tutored on the fifth day. When the nonhandicapped children came for tutoring, they would sit on the opposite side of a desk from the handicapped tutor to receive the individualized sign language instruction. The tutors and tutees were rotated each week so that more children could become acquainted with each other.

Handicapped students were trained in several techniques which allowed them to assume the role of tutor. These skills included the following:

(1) demonstrate the sign for the tutee

(2) do the sign again with the tutee

(3) allow the tutee to do the sign alone

(4) give the tutee praise or corrective feedback

The culminating tutoring activity was signing the song, "Hello, Again" from Neil Diamond's, "The Jazz Singer." Again, the handicapped tutors were taught to sign the song first and then teach the signs to their peers from the regular classroom.

Following the eight weeks of tutoring, three trained examiners interviewed each of the regular class students concerning their attitudes toward handicapped students and the tutoring experience. Parent interviews were also conducted in the home of each parent. Four weeks following the completion of the tutoring, a delayed sign language test was adminstered to all student participants.

Results

The results of the tabulations on the Social Acceptance Observation Form showed that before the tutoring began, handicapped students spent an average of 5 percent of the recess time interacting with a nonhandicapped peer. Of the total possible of 135 minutes over three days of recess, the mean amount of social interaction for a handicapped student with nonhandicapped peers was 6 minutes and 52 seconds. Following the tutoring this three day mean increased to 62 minutes and 13 seconds. The mean percentage of interaction time increased from 5% to 46% of available free play time. A paired t-test showed this difference to be significant ($t=11.14$, $p<.001$).

Table 1 summarizes the statistical data for the handicapped students social interaction observation and sign language pre and posttests. The results of the sign language pretest showed that the handicapped students retained nearly all of the

signs they had learned during the project. None of the nonhandicapped students knew sign language prior to the project. For this reason a pretest was not administered. Results of the posttest seen in Table 1 show that the nonhandicapped students also retained nearly all of the signs learned during tutoring.

Table 1

Social Interaction and Sign Language

Pre and Post Measurements

Measurement	Mean	Standard Deviation
Minutes of social interaction prior to tutoring	6.86 minutes	6.90
Minutes of social interaction following tutoring	62.20 minutes	20.80
Sign language pretest for handicapped students (percent correct)	1.33%	5.40
Sign language posttest for handicapped students (percent correct)	94.13%	11.72
Sign language posttest for nonhandicapped students (percent correct)	98.90%	1.30

Nonhandicapped Social Questionnaire

The results of the Nonhandicapped Social Questionnaire showed that most students in the regular classroom (96%) felt that making friends with their handicapped tutors was easy. Fully 92% felt that their tutors were "good"; that the tutors were "fun to be with," and that they felt "much more friendly" toward the tutors following the tutoring. Most of the regular class students (71%) said that the handicapped tutors "knew more" than had been expected prior to the project. The remaining respondants felt either that the tutors knew as much as expected (13%)

or were undecided (16%). In a separate question 88% of the students felt that the handicapped students should tutor again the following year. The remaining students were either undecided (8%) or felt that the tutors should not tutor again (4%).

Parent Interviews

Parent reactions to the project were generally positive. When asked if they had noticed any change in their child's self-perceptions, 93% reported that their child's self-confidence had increased. The most common reason given by parents for this increase was that the children felt "proud that they could do something (sign language) no one else in the family could do." When asked to describe their child's feelings concerning the project, 93% reported that their child enjoyed the project. When asked to estimate the amount of time their child spent practicing the sign language at home, 40% of the parents said that their child was "always practicing," and were unable to specify the amount of time in hours. The remaining parents reported that their child spent an average of 2 hours and 20 minutes per week practicing sign language at home. In another question parents were asked if their perceptions of their handicapped child had changed during the course of the project. Most parents (73%) said that their confidence in their child's ability to learn had increased. The remaining parents reported that their perceptions had not changed. All of the parents said that they wanted to see the program continue the following year.

Discussion and Conclusions

With the proper training and support educable mentally retarded students can become competent in assuming the role of tutor. They can learn to demonstrate the learning task, monitor their student and give helpful feedback. Students who have handicaps in addition to retardation, such as motor and speech problems, seem to have greater difficulty acquiring tutoring skills, and therefore, need more support during the tutoring process.

While there is strong indication that the peer tutoring model employed in this study can improve the social acceptance of handicapped students, further research must be conducted before firm conclusions can be drawn. This research should include appropriate comparison groups of handicapped students who do not participate as tutors. Schools which use a cluster approach to mainstreaming would be particularly appropriate for this research.

Further data should also be collected to determine the feasibility of training students as tutors who have other handicapping conditions such as: 1) visual or hearing impairments, 2) learning disabilities, or 3) behavioral disorders. As studies with these students are conducted, measures should be taken to determine changes in students' academic achievement, social acceptance and how long the social acceptance effects last following the tutoring.

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